

Iraqi cabinet announced under US pressure

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29 April 2005

After months of infighting, and despite numerous unresolved differences, the dominant pro-occupation parties in the Iraqi National Assembly have been pressured by the Bush administration into forming a government. A cabinet list was submitted by transitional prime minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari to the assembly yesterday and approved by 180 of the 275 legislators.

In order to create the illusion of stability and popular support, the Bush administration has insisted since the January 30 assembly elections that the parliament must form a “government of national unity,” which includes representatives of all the various sectarian and ethnically-based factions. Differences between them, however, caused the process to drag out for three months.

Disagreements over the allocation of presidential-level positions prevented Jaafari, a leader of the Shiite United Iraqi Alliance (UIA), from even being named as the transitional prime minister until April 7—more than two months after the elections. The selection of a cabinet caused further delays in forming a government due to bitter disputes over the parceling out of key ministries.

The gaping holes in the cabinet announced yesterday indicate that it is an attempt to sidestep the differences among the Iraqi factions and appease Washington. Jaafari has not appointed a defence minister, an oil minister, or a Sunni Muslim legislator to take one of the four deputy prime ministerial positions. The human rights, electricity and industry ministries—all of which are directly related to disputes over internal security and the direction of economic policy—were also left unfilled.

The cabinet excludes the supporters of US-installed interim prime minister Iyad Allawi, who have been demanding some of the most powerful ministries as their price for joining the government. Sunni legislators are already denouncing the Shiite and Kurdish factions for failing to give them sufficient representation or authority.

The sharpest disputes have raged over the UIA’s insistence on holding the majority of ministries, including the interior ministry which controls the internal security apparatus, and the Kurdish nationalist parties’ demands for the oil ministry, which will oversee the allocation of

contracts for the exploitation of the country’s considerable reserves of untapped oil and gas.

These demands provoked sharp tensions with the supporters of Allawi and the small number of Sunni Muslim legislators. The majority of Iraqi Sunnis, who make up some 20 percent of the population and overwhelmingly oppose the US occupation, refused to vote on January 30. As a consequence, only 17 Sunnis were elected, none of whom can claim any mass base of support. They nevertheless demanded as many as 10 ministries, including defence. The US had pressured Jaafari to agree, in order to use the fact that there are Sunnis in the government to try and undermine support for the anti-occupation insurgency in the main Sunni population centres.

Allawi’s Iraqi List demanded at least five ministries, including the interior ministry, which the interim prime minister has stacked with operatives of the former Baathist regime’s intelligence agencies who are prepared to work with the US occupation against the resistance movement. The UIA insisted that one of its leaders take the ministry and declared it would carry out a “de-Baathification” purge to remove all those connected with the purges and atrocities committed under Saddam Hussein.

Jaafari’s cabinet is crafted to appear as a government of national unity. It includes representatives of Iraq’s main religious creeds and ethnic groups, with 15 Shiite Muslims, four Sunni Muslims, one Christian and seven ethnic Kurds. Six ministers are women. The unfilled ministerial positions, however, make clear that none of the conflicts over the past three months have been resolved. The reason for the cabinet’s announcement yesterday was not “unity” among the pro-occupation parties, but the series of explicit demands over the past week by Bush administration officials.

The failure to form a government had thrown into doubt the timetable for the US-dictated reorganisation of the Iraqi state. Under the transitional period, which began with the January election, the parliament is supposed to draft a constitution by August 15, hold a national referendum to adopt it by October 15, and new elections by December 15.

The impasse in the parliament served to heighten the disgust of the Iraqi people with a process that millions

already consider to be nothing more than a political cover for the transformation of Iraq into a US-puppet state. The delay has consolidated support in certain areas for the armed resistance and strengthened the position of anti-occupation tendencies such as the Shiite movement led by cleric Moqtada al-Sadr.

Under conditions of growing alarm in Washington, the *New York Times* functioned as the conduit for US insistence on the immediate announcement of a cabinet. Last weekend, citing unnamed senior US officials, the *Times* reported that Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice telephoned Iraq's president and Kurdish leader Jalal Talabani on April 22, to insist that the factions agree on a government "as soon as they could". The *Times'* sources also claimed that Rice and Vice President Dick Cheney had met the same day with one of the two Iraqi vice-presidents, Shiite leader Adil Abdul Mahdi, to convey the same message.

At an April 25 press conference in Texas, Rice denied that she had made a phone call to Talabani. The media follow-up on the *Times* report, however, provided the Bush administration with the opportunity to publicly spell out what it expected from the Iraqi parliament.

Rice declared: "I think everybody believes that the Iraqi people now deserve a government, given that they took the risk to vote. We've had opportunities to represent those views to a number of Iraqi leaders. I have, the Vice President has, others have as well... and we're going to continue to say that it is important to keep momentum in the political process."

State department spokesman Adam Ereli told a Washington press conference the same day: "The US, and the Iraqis, want to see a government formed as soon as possible so that we can keep moving toward fulfillment of the political transition in Iraq."

The bluntest remarks were made on April 26 at a joint press conference by Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and the chairman of the joint-chiefs-of-staff, General Richard Myers. Both implicitly blamed the ongoing insurgency on the factional infighting in the parliament.

Answering a question on the current upsurge in insurgent attacks, Myers declared: "The essential point is... the political process must go forward. We must have a cabinet appointed here very quickly. The ministries must continue to work. People must focus on two things, developing a constitution and developing their ministries into functioning ministries that continue to help."

Rumsfeld repeated the demand he made in Iraq in early April that the Shiite parties drop their opposition to the use of former Baathists in the interior ministry, on the grounds that Hussein's secret police were the most "competent" forces to hunt down and exterminate the anti-US resistance.

He told the press conference: "I urge that as they [the Iraqi factions] are considering people for important positions, whether at the ministry level or below, that they take into account not just the normal political factors that people properly take into account in a political deliberation, but that they take into account competence, because their country's success in defeating the insurgency depends on competence, and it depends on having a healthy chain-of-command down, from the top of their Iraqi government, down through to the people on the ground who are attempting to defeat the insurgents."

These public statements would have been matched by far sharper behind-the-scenes pressure. Within days, Jaafari had submitted a cabinet list for approval by Talabani and the two vice-presidents, Mahdi and Sunni tribal leader Ghazi al-Yawar, prior to its presentation to the parliament.

Significantly, the cabinet has revived the fortunes of Ahmad Chalabi. The émigré businessman, convicted embezzler and former CIA asset fell out temporarily with the US occupation during 2004, in part due to his opposition to the recruitment of Baathists into the security apparatus. Chalabi was named deputy prime minister and acting oil minister, while his nephew, Ali Abd al-Amir Allawi, was given the finance ministry.

In the face of US pressure, all the major factions in the Iraqi parliament have acquiesced to forming a government that has not addressed any of the divisions between them and which elevates Chalabi—one of the most unpopular individuals in Iraq—into one of the most crucial political positions. Nearly one third of the 275 legislators did not attend the parliament session so they did not have to cast a vote. Only five of the 185 members present voted against the cabinet list.

The capitulation to the Bush administration's demands underscores the essential characteristic of the new parliament. It represents a venal layer of the Iraqi ruling elite who are supporting the US occupation in order to gain a greater share of power and wealth. If the American military withdrew, the entire US-vetted government, parliament and state apparatus would collapse in the face of the popular backlash against those who have collaborated with the invasion and subjugation of the country.



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